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SUBJECT: AFRO-COLOMBIANS STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL IDENTITY

REF: A. BOGOTA (2006) 11226

[B](#). BOGOTA 02274

[C](#). BOGOTA 01836

Summary

[1](#). A century-and-a-half of state neglect has marginalized the majority of Afro-Colombians and created substantial deficits in income, health and education. Sometimes called an "invisible minority," only in recent years has the government acknowledged Afro-Colombians as a distinct ethnic group entitled to their own traditional lands and culture. There is wide disagreement about the size of the Afro-Colombian population. End Summary.

Lacking Basic Necessities

[2](#). The economic, health and educational needs of Afro-Colombians are largely unmet. Seventy-five percent of all Afro-Colombians live in poverty (earning less than USD 2 per day), and unemployment in predominately Afro-Colombian areas is almost double the national average. Infant mortality amongst Afro-Colombians is over 100 per thousand births, about five times higher than the rate for the general population, and Afro-Colombians lack health insurance at double the national average. The number of Afro-Colombians without any education is 30 percent higher than the national average, and some sources say the illiteracy rate for Afro-Colombians is almost 40 percent. Basic necessities are also a problem: in the Pacific coast department of Choco, where the population is over 80 percent Afro-Colombian, almost four out of five households lack clean water, reliable electricity, or sewage services (ref A).

The "Invisible Minority"

[3](#). Juan de Dios Mosquera, the director of Cimarron, one of Colombia's oldest Afro-Colombian NGOs, calls Afro-Colombians an "invisible minority." Colombia did not formally recognize Afro-Colombians as a distinct ethnic group until 1991, even though it abolished slavery 150 years ago. Mosquera thinks Afro-Colombians have been ignored because they were concentrated in the isolated Pacific coast, physically and psychologically separated from the rest of the country by mountains and poor infrastructure.

[4](#). Afro-Colombians are Colombia's largest ethnic minority,

but no one can say with confidence what the size of the Afro-Colombian population is. Before the 2005 census, the government estimated there were about 10 million Afro-Colombians. The census tallied only 4.5 million, or 10.6 percent of the population. Demographers think there are at least 10 million Colombians who, to a significant degree, are of African descent. The 2005 census had a multiplicity of possible ethnic self-identifications to choose from other than "Afro-Colombian." Many who could have legitimately considered themselves "Afro-Colombian," chose another ethnic self-designation. Additionally, many Afro-Colombians say they were never even asked by census-takers to identify their ethnicity. Afro-Colombian groups suggest the population was significantly undercounted. Anecdotal evidence supports this hypothesis.

Fragmented Identity, Nascent NGOs
and Organizational Challenges

15. Urban migration and forced displacement have undermined Afro-Colombian communities. About two-thirds of Afro-Colombians live in urban areas; many are recent arrivals. Most Afro-Colombian voluntary migrants said in a recent poll that employment opportunities were one of the main reasons they migrated. Afro-Colombians also make up 30 to 40 percent of the population that is displaced by violence. Pastor Murillo, the director of the Afro-Colombian section of the government's Ethnic Affairs Bureau and one of the government's highest-ranking Afro-Colombian officials, says population movement has fragmented Afro-Colombian identity, which was traditionally grounded in local communities. He thinks weak group affiliation hinders the development of Afro-Colombian political organizations.

16. Arnobio Cordoba Palacios, a former mayor of Choco's capitol Quibdo and current director of an NGO that provides microcredit to Afro-Colombian businesses, thinks Afro-Colombians didn't develop strong political organizations because, paradoxically, Colombia never formalized racial segregation. The absence of "Jim Crow" type laws meant Afro-Colombians had less incentive to develop a racially-based sense of self-identity, although informal segregation is plainly visible. Additionally, because the Colombian body politic was not directly confronted with the issue of racial inequality, it was easier to overlook the plight of Afro-Colombians. Contacts tell us that on the Pacific coast region, which has the most homogenous Afro-Colombian population and where about half of all Afro-Colombians live, the sense of Afro-Colombian identity is the strongest (ref A).

17. Afro-Colombian congresswoman Maria Isabel Urrutia notes that there were no organized Afro-Colombian groups before the 1970s. Many that exist now lack political muscle and do not share a common agenda. She thinks the lack of strong advocacy groups explains why Afro-Colombians only have two special seats in the House of Representatives while indigenous groups (whose population of 1.4 million is far smaller than the Afro-Colombian population) have a special seat in the House of Representatives and two in the more powerful Senate. Urrutia says the government now pays more attention to Afro-Colombian issues, but adds that a special education program for Afro-Colombians was statutorily created but never funded. She thinks President Uribe's recent meetings with Afro-Colombian leadership were a positive step. Urrutia has introduced legislation to criminalize discrimination based on race or ethnicity.

18. In 1993 the government began designating traditional Afro-Colombian lands as "communal territories" with collective land titles pursuant to "Ley 70." These territories are loosely governed by "consejos comunitarios." Consejo members are chosen democratically, although traditional leadership roles play a role in who is chosen. Consejos, primary responsibilities are deciding who is a member of the community, what land community members receive,

and how they can use it. Consejos operate largely through consensus. Contacts tell us that even when individuals make deals to use land without consejo approval, consejos often lack the capacity to stop such usage. This has led to consejos losing control of some communal lands (ref B).

¶9. There are now over 5 million hectares of communal territories that have been collectively titled, mostly in the Pacific coast region. Still, they are difficult to develop since banks will not accept their land as collateral because it is legally inalienable. Development in the region is also hindered by corruption and the presence of multiple illegal armed groups, including FARC militias, renegade ex-paramilitaries, local narco-cartels and newly emerging criminal groups (ref C). There are also well-substantiated instances where Afro-Colombian communities were forced from their land by groups seeking to develop lucrative palm oil plantations (ref B). Since much of this land is located in areas where government institutions are weak or, in some cases, not present, legal enforcement of title is difficult.

USG Support for Afro-Colombians

¶10. Afro-Colombians tell us it sometimes seems that the USG cares more about their issues than the GoC does. President Bush's visit, visits by other US VIPs, and embassy activities have helped raise the profile of Afro-Colombian issues in the Uribe administration.

¶11. The USG supports the development of an Afro-Colombian caucus through USAID funding to the International Republican Institute. Caucus members come from across the political spectrum and include politicians from the Liberal party, the U party, and the Polo Democratico party. These representatives have diverging views on many policy issues. Still, the IRI process has gotten Afro-Colombian representatives to focus on an Afro-Colombian agenda that cuts across party lines. As a result, the group developed four specific proposals for the National Development Plan, and lobbied the GoC to accept them. Deputy Director of National Planning Mauricio Santamaria told the caucus the administration would endorse the points. These proposals will help provide a legal framework for policies addressing Afro-Colombian social and economic needs. Through the IRI activities USAID has also sponsored informational seminars on issues of special interest to Afro-Colombian legislators to excellent effect.

¶12. In addition to the caucus, USAID devotes substantial resources towards supporting Afro-Colombian organizations, including NGOs, associations, and consejos comunitarios. More than 200,000 Afro-Colombians have benefited from USAID alternative development, local governance, forestry, peace and justice programs. USG assistance for displaced persons helped over 650,000 Afro-Colombians. In 2006, USAID committed over USD 4.5 million for internally displaced Afro-Colombians.

¶13. The USG is sponsoring scholarship programs for Afro-Colombian high school and university students to study English. Many educated Afro-Colombians found the door to higher education or professional advancement closed due to a lack of English language capability. The "Martin Luther King Fellows" and "College Horizons" programs offer USD 230,000 of scholarship funding to address this problem.

Drucker